DAWN

OPINION

External weaknesses

FOR now, Pakistan's return to a current account deficit in the first half of the fiscal year is less a cause for worry than a reminder of how fragile the external balance remains once growth resumes. The current account has slipped back to a $1.17bn deficit in the first six months of the year — following a surplus of $957m in the same period last year and $2bn over the full year. But the gap remains within the FY26 target of $2.1bn, or 0pc-1pc of GDP. The gap is blamed on the widening trade deficit that rose from $14.5bn to $19.2bn in July-December, despite continued demand compression. It underlines the extent of the growth challenge that lies ahead for policymakers and the State Bank amid dwindling foreign private and official flows. It also shows that the balance-of-payments problem is not a one-off event but a structural issue even if the immediate triggers remain a massive rise in food imports and a significant decrease in rice exports. The Afghan border's closure, too, has played a part.

The saving grace for the external account so far has been increased remittances and lower global oil prices. However, these cushions still leave us vulnerable to geopolitical shocks in the Middle East, as they may evaporate in case of regional escalations, particularly involving Iran. Undoubtedly, the containment of the current account deficit and last year's surplus has played a critical role in anchoring foreign exchange market sentiments, preventing speculative pressure on the home currency.

Now that the return to a current account deficit has dented this sentiment, if not eroded it altogether, we may see renewed pressure on the exchange rate and the SBP further tightening legitimate currency outflows if this trend continues. The emerging situation may force the SBP to again halt the monetary easing it just restarted after several months. A current account deficit is not a disease; it is rather a symptom of what ails the economy: falling agricultural and industrial productivity and policy failures holding exports down and scaring away foreign private investors. Recent data shows that both outbound shipments and non-debt-creating, long-term foreign investment are plummeting. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has set up an inter-ministerial committee to recommend a strategy to exit the IMF programme. Obviously, such a strategy would focus on building up growth momentum in the next two years. The committee must understand that there are structural weaknesses in agriculture, manufacturing and investment feeding into external imbalances. Unless growth is anchored in productivity, exports and sustained investment inflows, we will remain stuck in low-growth mode and be vulnerable to the next balance-of-payments shock.

Iran death toll

WHILE several Western sources had cited implausibly high figures for the death toll in the recent protests in Iran, figures from within the Iranian establishment have admitted to a large number of casualties, pointing to the harshness of the crackdown by the state. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself has said that "several thousands" had been killed, while an Iranian official cited the figure of 5,000 deaths to Reuters. These are shocking numbers. Iranian officials insist that most of the deaths were caused by foreign-backed saboteurs, but there can be little doubt that security personnel used excessive force against the demonstrators. In fact, it would be na ve to assume that foreign forces were not involved in inflaming an already explosive situation. For example, US President Donald Trump had promised Iranian protesters that "help is on the way", while Mossad's Farsi X account had boasted that "we are with you on the ground". An Israeli minister had further bragged that Tel Aviv's operatives were active in Iran "right now". These statements leave little to the imagination.

The reality of the situation in Iran is complex; the state used excessive, deadly force against its own people, yet at the same time a hybrid war was being waged against Iran by the US and Israel to dislodge the Ayatollah's rule, and push for regime change. The Iranian state should review its actions. While there is little Iran can do to counter the effects of the strangulating sanctions imposed by the US, which have devastated its economy, it must treat its citizens with compassion in these times of severe economic distress. Acts of murder and violence committed in the name of protests may be deserving of legal action, but peaceful demonstrators must not be treated harshly. The illegal US-Israel campaign for regime change in Iran is unrelenting. Neither Tel Aviv nor Washington have any sympathy for the Iranian people and are simply exploiting genuine popular grievances to get even with Tehran's rulers. The US and its allies are driven by geopolitical aims and cold realpolitik, not any genuine concern for human rights. Moreover, we have seen the disastrous results of other regime change operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Foreign actors should stay out of Iran, and let the Iranian people chart their own course.

No private matter

THE Supreme Court's recent judgement upholding the conviction of Khursheed Ahmad for the killing of his wife, Gulshan Bibi, is a searing indictment of how domestic violence is normalised and enabled in Pakistan. In language rare for judicial verdicts, the bench acknowledged "with a heavy heart" the cruel societal norms that force women back into the homes that are no less than a "living hell". The judgement deserves to be read beyond courtrooms. Writing for the bench headed by Justice Muhammad Hashim Kakar, Justice Ishtiaq Ibrahim went beyond assessing the evidence, linking the murder to a wider chain of abuse. Gulshan Bibi had left her husband after repeated beatings, only to be persuaded by family elders to reconcile. That fatal decision, rooted in social pressure, stigma and misplaced notions of family honour, ended up costing her her life. Sadly, this pattern extends well beyond one household. Families often act as unwitting enforcers of abuse, prioritising marital continuity over women's safety. Law enforcement, too, frequently treats domestic violence as a private matter — until it is too late. Protection mechanisms are weak in Pakistan. Shelters are hard to come by and prosecutions rare, unless death is part of the equation.

The state cannot afford to treat such judgements as moral commentary alone. They carry urgent policy lessons. Domestic violence laws must be put into practice, not merely enacted. Police must be trained to recognise patterns of abuse early and intervene. Trial courts should take a documented history of violence seriously. Above all, women must have real alternatives to returning to abusive homes — through accessible shelters, legal support and financial help — so that reconciliation is voluntary, not forced. The court has done its part by naming the problem plainly. Whether that clarity results in protection depends on whether lawmakers, law enforcement and society are willing to accept that domestic violence is a public failure, not a private matter.

BY ZAHID HUSSAIN

The world according to Trump

The so-called Board of Peace is meant to be used to advance US hegemony.

AMERICAN President Donald Trump now seeks to create a new international organisation to rival the United Nations. His idea of the 'Board of Peace' goes beyond its original UN mandate of overseeing the rehabilitation of Gaza, which has been devastated by two years of Israel's genocidal war. Reportedly, so far nearly 60 countries have been invited to join the 'board' chaired by the American president. It is supposed to operate as a "more nimble and effective international peacebuilding body". It will cost $1 billion for nations to buy a permanent seat on the so-called board. Many heads of government and state representing potential member countries have been invited to join. The full list of the invitees is still not known.

Interestingly, there is no mention of Gaza in the Board of Peace charter. Last year, a UN Security Council resolution had authorised the formation of the board to oversee the post-war administrative transition of the enclave. Trump has separately named an 11-member executive board for Gaza as part of the 20-point peace plan for the enclave.

But the charter reportedly sent out by the Trump administration to potential members projects the Board of Peace as an international conflict resolution body along the lines of the UN. One wonders under what mandate this international body is being set up. It is the brainchild of the American president who seems to consider himself as the sole arbiter of the global order.

According to international media, the charter gives wide-ranging powers to Trump as the board's chair, allowing him to appoint and remove member states — a decision that could only be overturned by a two-thirds majority of members. It also provides him with the "exclusive authority to create, modify, or dissolve subsidiary entities as necessary or appropriate to fulfil the Board of Peace's mission".

Trump has been a fierce critic of the UN and under his presidency America has pulled out of several of its agencies. His Board of Peace is also meant to undermine the global body. He aspires to create a new world order dictated by American military might.

Interestingly, the charter says the objective of the board is "to promote stability, restore dependable and lawful governance, and secure enduring peace in areas affected or threatened by conflict". It is ironic that this talk of lawful governance comes from an administration that recently kidnapped the president of a sovereign state (Venezuela) and his wife in a military operation that trampled over all international laws. Trump has dismissed international law, saying only his "own morality" can curb the aggressive policies he is pursuing across the world.

Trump has also threatened to use military force against other South American countries and has bombed Iran last year. It aided Israel's genocidal war in Gaza that has killed more than 70,000 Palestinians and destroyed the entire enclave. The same administration, whose imperialistic designs have been fully exposed, claims to uphold the idea of a rules-based world order.

Describing the need for setting up a new international organisation, the charter maintains: "Durable peace requires pragmatic judgement, common sense solutions, and the courage to depart from approaches and institutions that have too often failed". It doesn't, of course, talk about the fact that America's own disdain for the rule of law has been the main reason for the failure of the UN and other international institutions. This board cannot provide global peace and stability. It is meant to be used to advance America's hegemony.

Curiously, the idea of this American-led multinational organisation has been floated as the Trump administration prepares to take over Greenland, which has brought Washington into conflict with its European Nato allies. He has imposed an initial 10 per cent tariff on European countries opposing his plan to seize the Danish-controlled autonomous island.

In a recent message to Norway's prime minister, Trump reportedly said that one reason why he is pushing to acquire Greenland is that he didn't win the Nobel Peace Prize. "Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace..." was Trump's message.

Trump's anger over not getting the Nobel Peace Prize seems to be driving him to take the world down. He no longer distinguishes between rivals and allies. Nothing could be more dangerous for world peace than such a megalomaniac at the helm of the world's biggest power. His plan to create and chair an international organisation as a rival to the UN will be the final nail in the coffin of an already collapsing global order.

Strangely, neither the Board of Peace nor the Gaza Executive Board under it has Palestinian representation. Instead, the executive board is stuffed with American officials whose pro-Zionist bias is well known. Besides Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and America's Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff are also included in the executive board. There are also officials from Qatar and Egypt and an Israeli businessman, according to media reports.

One of the most controversial founding members of the Gaza board is Tony Blair, the former British prime minister, who is accused of war crimes for his decision to join the American war in Iraq.

As a part of the peace plan, an International Stabilisation Force will be raised to lead security operations, support comprehensive demilitarisation and enable the safe delivery of humanitarian aid. Pakistan and some other Muslim countries have been approached to join the force that will be led by an American military officer. Given its dubious mandate, there is a real danger that the ISF will find itself fighting the Palestinian resistance group. Pakistan needs to think through any decision to join the ISF. ■

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BY ALI TAUQEER SHEIKH

Islamabad under siege

THE assault comes from multiple directions, each more brazen than the last. Consider what happened barely a stone's throw from Parliament House itself: while legislators debated inside, Shakarparian contractors were busy deforesting a beautiful tract of land within sight of the nation's seat of power. The trees fell and the earth was cleared, primed for mudslides once the monsoon arrives. Nobody in authority raised an alarm. The symbolism is almost too perfect: as we talk about governance, the very ground beneath our feet is being stolen.

This is not an isolated incident but part of a pattern. The Islamabad Wildlife Board, established precisely to protect the Margalla Hills National Park, has been neutered. Rina Saeed Khan, the champion who stood guard over these hills, now faces harassment through bogus cases, a punishment for the 'crime' of doing what the law mandates. When protectors become the persecuted, the capture is complete.

The physical transformation of the city tells the same story. Those cascading contours that once defined Islamabad's character, giving it a topography distinct from the concrete monotony of other urban centres are being systematically flattened. This destruction is now cascading beyond the capital territory, driven by influential housing societies in the surrounding hilly areas. Contractors fill in these natural undulations to create level plots and farmhouses, erasing in months what nature took millennia to create. The model city is being reduced to just another flat, characterless expanse of development.

The city has been further bifurcated by signal-free corridors that have killed its walkability. Islamabad was designed as a city where I could once move between sectors on foot or bicycle, where neighbourhoods connected organically. Now, massive thoroughfares carve through the urban fabric, making it impossible to cross without risking one's life. We have prioritised cars over people and speed over liveability, destroying the pedestrian character that once made the city humane.

Construction in green belts now proceeds with impunity. These areas were once the oxygen veins of the city, meant to ensure that development never became suffocating. Today, we allow construction there and needlessly expand roads, parking lots, and seminaries. Semi-permanent camps for law-enforcement agencies further narrow the spaces that let the city breathe. Each road-widening project claims more green spaces — the very things that made Islamabad different.

We have carved the E sectors out of what was supposed to be the Margalla Hills National Park. These areas were intended as habitats for leopards, pangolins, barking deer and grey goral. Instead, we authorised cricket pavilions, university campuses, golf courses, and private housing, turning ecological corridors into real estate opportunities. The wildlife that once roamed freely now finds itself trapped in shrinking pockets, leading to the conflicts we wring our hands about when a leopard ventures into the encroached areas. We took their home and act surprised when they show up at ours.

Meanwhile, garbage chokes the tributaries of the Lai *nullah*, and invasive species like paper mulberry are spread in the name of landscaping, driving away indigenous birds which need indigenous trees for nesting, mating and chirping.

> The capital now appears regularly on pollution indices it once escaped.

The consequences of this reckless development play out in tragic ways. We once took pride in a gravity-based drainage system where every manhole bore the Mohenjo Daro seal, a symbol of inherited excellence in urban planning. Now, the CDA and its approved housing societies have encroached upon natural channels, narrowed *nullahs*, and built roads over storm-water drains. When the rains come, the water has nowhere to go. The floods in E-11 in 2021 and G-11 in 2025 were the price of denying water its right of passage. This is manufactured urban flooding, and it persists because nobody is held accountable.

While rainwater harvesting is ignored, all sources of natural recharging are being flattened. This run-off adds to pollution, while ad hoc population growth depletes the groundwater, allowing the 'tanker mafia' to emerge. Even our ancient heritage is not spared; we allowed encroachments on caves where Buddhist monks once meditated. We cut through the heart of our ecosystem to construct corridors like Alexander Road, ostensibly for connectivity, but really to open up land for developers who see only profit where there should be preservation.

Perhaps the most stunning revelation of the current mindset was the proposal to mortgage F-9 Park for a sukuk bond worth Rs500 billion. The federal government actually considered pledging this 750-acre public park as collateral for debt. Though the proposal was withdrawn after a public outcry, the fact that it was seriously entertained reveals a disturbing truth.

Meanwhile, the air tells its own story of decline. Islamabad's air was once distinctively crisp, and a part of its identity, as were its tree-lined avenues. That air is gone. Unchecked vehicular emissions, construction dust, and the burning of waste have transformed the atmosphere. The capital now appears regularly on pollution indices it once escaped, joining Lahore in the unenviable club of Pakistan's toxic cities. Every infrastructure project extracts its tribute; highways and metro extensions demand the sacrifice of mature trees that functioned as carbon sinks. The arithmetic of 'compensatory' saplings never adds up to the restoration of a lost ecosystem.

At the heart of the capital sits Rawal Lake, a prize waterbody that is slowly dying. Industrial effluents mix with sewage, and solid waste accumulates at the edges. Expanding irregular housing societies in Banigala, Bhara Kahu, and Chak Shahzad discharge waste into the lake, treating a strategic asset like a dumping ground.

This environmental siege exposes a fundamental disconnect between what we claim to value and what we actually protect. The institutions exist and the laws are on the books, but the political will to enforce them is missing. Islamabad was built as a statement that Pakistan could create a capital worthy of a great nation. That vision is being betrayed through internal surrender. The 'Asian Geneva' is becoming just another casualty of unchecked development. Unless accountability is restored and the protectors are themselves protected, the siege will continue until there is nothing left worth defending. ■

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